



SUCCESS STORIES 2007

## Reducing Health Care Costs Through Work Site Wellness Programs

AUSTIN, TEXAS



*Steps to a Healthier Austin supports a city work site wellness program that provides transit operators access to exercise facilities, healthy foods, and health assessments to help reduce obesity.*

### CONTACT

Steps to a Healthier Austin

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### What is the public health problem?

- According to 2005 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data, half of adults in the Steps to a Healthier Austin intervention area do not engage in 30 minutes or more of moderate physical activity 5 or more days per week.
- Additionally, 75% of adults surveyed reported that they do not eat fruits and vegetables five or more times each day, 37% said they were overweight, and 17% said they were obese.
- Obesity results in significant increases in medical expenditures and absenteeism among full-time employees. The costs of obesity (excluding overweight) at a firm with 1,000 employees are estimated to be \$285,000 per year. Approximately 30% of this total results from increased absenteeism.\*

### How is Steps responding?

- Steps to a Healthier Austin is partnering with Capital Metro, the Austin transit authority, to implement a work site wellness program. The Steps Program works closely with Capital Metro's health and wellness vendor, which provides consultations with dietitians and personal trainers, a 24-hour company fitness center, and personalized health assessments.
- Through the wellness program, transit operators have unlimited access to Capital Metro's newly developed fitness center, receive discounts for purchasing healthier foods in the company's cafeteria, and can enroll in a myriad of weight and nutritional management programs.
- Cash incentives reward employees for joining weight-loss programs, quitting tobacco use, using the on-site gym, and achieving other health-related goals such as lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

### What is the health impact?

- Since launching the program in 2003, Capital Metro has experienced substantial reductions in its health care costs. Total costs increased only 9.6% from 2004 to 2005, compared with 26.8% from 2003 to 2004. The company predicted that health care costs would increase only 6% from 2005 to 2006.
- Program participants report significant improvements in physical activity, healthy food consumption, weight loss, blood pressure management, stress levels, and overall general health.
- Employee absenteeism rates—an indicator of worker job satisfaction and health—also decreased more than 44%, from a high of 12.4% in March 2004 to 6.9% in June 2006.

### Why is this program working?

- Studies show that comprehensive work site health programs focused on lifestyle behavior change lead to improvements in health behaviors among employees and a return on investment for employers in terms of better employee health and lower health care costs.

\*American Journal of Health Promotion; 2005; 20:45–51



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